CIA rebuked for mail snooping

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Mail intercepted and retained by the CIA has been turned over to Justice Department investigators, and the postmaster general issued a sharp rebuke to the intelligence agency for intefering with the mail.

The fact that the agency had kept some of the letters it opened during its 20-year mail surveillance program was revealed for the first time Thursday by Postmaster General Benjamin F. Bailar.

According to Bailar, CIA director William E. Colby has turned over to him 110 opened letters and post cards which had been intercepted by the agency in 1972.

According to the Postal Service, the CIA previously had claimed "that all such intercepted and opened mail had been copied and returned to the mails."

Bailar added that the mail had been surrendered to the Justice Department in response to a search warrant and that it "is being held pending possible legal action against those responsible for opening and detaining it."

According to authoritative sources, the department's criminal division has been investigating the CIA's mail surveillance program since last December when Colby first informed then-Deputy Atty. Gen. Laurence H. Silberman about the program.

According to the Rockefeller Commission, which conducted its own investigation of the mail program, "United States statutes specifically forbid opening the mail."

Unlike many of the "plainly unlawful" CIA acts outlined by the commission, the common five-year statutue of limitations might not prevent prosecution of officials responsible for opening the mail, since the program was not terminated until February 1973.

The same sources also confirmed reports that the criminal division is investigating possible perjury charges against former CIA director Richard M. Helms in connection with statements he has made under oath about agency activities. Helms, now ambassador to Iran, is scheduled to make a third appearance today before the Senate intelligence panel to answer questions about alleged CIA involement in assassination plots.

Bailar, who said he had been distressed when he first learned of the mail program, wrote Colby that "the revelation that mail was removed from the international mail stream, opened and retained indefinitely, is doubly disturbing."

Colby informed Bailar on Wednesday that the mail, 85 postcards and 25 letters, had been found on a shelf during a "recent routine change in office space." Colby said the mail apparently had been sent in early 1972 from Russia to addresses in the United States.

In a return letter Thursday, Bailar said: "It is an understatement to tell you I am shocked.... The events you describe in your letter stand in clear violation of the sanctity of the mails and threaten to shake public confidence in the integrity of the mail."

In a letter of apology to each of the intended recipients, Bailar called the CIA's retention of their mail "a serious violation of your rights."